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# The relationship between irony and sarcasm: Insights from a first-order metalanguage investigation

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**Abstract:** The relationship between irony and sarcasm has been much discussed and yet there is still little agreement on how the two relate at a theoretical level, as Attardo (2000: 795) notes “there is no consensus on whether irony and sarcasm are essentially the same thing [...] or if they differ significantly”. The aim of this paper is to take a user-perspective and report on how participants in everyday conversations in the UK and Italy talk about irony and sarcasm and what kinds of authentic behaviors are described using these labels. These findings are discussed with reference to the academic concepts of irony and sarcasm to investigate how the lay and academic perspectives relate.

**Keywords:** mock politeness, implicational impoliteness, irony, sarcasm, corpus pragmatics

## 1 Introduction

This paper addresses the “thorny relationship” (Dynel 2016) between irony and sarcasm. These are both commonly discussed in terms of their (im)politeness potential, as evidenced in their inclusion in taxonomies of both politeness (e.g., Brown and Levinson 1987) and impoliteness (e.g., Culpeper 1996). The analysis of these features in this paper takes a first-order perspective, that is to say I start by examining how irony and sarcasm are talked about in everyday conversation and identify what kinds of behavior are actually labelled as *ironic* and *sarcastic*. Such user perspectives are compared with the second-order “theoretical construct” (Watts et al. 1992) which is most commonly associated with academic study.

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## 1.1 First-order and second-order (im)politeness

The first-order/second-order distinction originates with work by Watts et al. (1992) who state that:

We take first-order politeness to correspond to the various ways in which polite behavior is perceived and talked about by members of socio-cultural groups. It encompasses, in other words, commonsense notions of politeness. Second-order politeness, on the other hand, is a theoretical construct, a term within a theory of social behavior and language usage (Watts et al. 1992: 3)

Thus, the first/second order distinction allows us to separate out our lay understanding and evaluations of behavior as members of a given community of practice, and our conceptualizations as social scientists investigating the relationship between language and social interaction. Second-order politeness is an interpretation and theorization which aims to explain the phenomena observed as first-order politeness (Eelen 2001: 44).

This distinction between first and second-order understandings becomes highly significant in our field because politeness exists as both a folk concept and a scientific concept. Eelen (2001: 33) draws on Vygotsky's (1968) distinction between *spontaneous concepts* and *scientific concepts* to clarify the discussion. Whereas spontaneous concepts are viewed as being driven by experience of the phenomena, scientific concepts are detached from day-to-day reality, and pre-defined. From Vygotsky, Eelen takes the examples of "brother" and "Archimedean law" as examples of spontaneous and scientific concepts respectively. We might equally take terms like "politeness" and "phoneme". The former, the spontaneous concept, will be known to each us through experience, before it becomes known as a theoretical construct; "it originates in the realm of personal experience" (Eelen 2001: 33). In contrast, the latter, "phoneme", is learnt first as a concept and then "filled up" with empirical content, a process which typically involves the explanatory efforts of a teacher" (Eelen 2001: 33). "Irony" and "sarcasm", like politeness, exist first (both in absolute chronology and any individual's personal experience) as spontaneous concepts, and only subsequently as a scientific concept. Thus, as researchers in the fields of (im)politeness or irony studies, we possess and must handle both concepts.

In recent years, this first-order/second-order distinction has gained considerable traction in the field of (im)politeness with researchers emphasizing the importance of investigating user perspectives (cf. Watts 2003; Locher and Watts 2005; Locher and Bousfield 2008; Culpeper 2009; Culpeper et al. 2010; Grainger 2011; Arendholz 2013, *inter alia*). At the most fundamental level, the reason for separating out these concepts is that any conflation between these two orders

risks blurring the epistemological status of the theoretical analysis (Eelen 2001: 30). As Watts et al. (1992: 4, emphasis mine) emphasize, “in examining linguistic politeness we are dealing with a lay first-order concept which has been *elevated* to the status of a second-order concept” and without recognizing the *elevation* and subsequently distinguishing between the two we risk ambiguity in theoretical discussions. Furthermore, work into first-order understandings can help us to see how these have influenced second-order theory. As Waters (2012) argues, we need to recognize the cultural specificity of second-order descriptions in order to avoid ethnocentrism. Which is to say that, given the second-order concept draws on the first-order concept, and given that most research in this field has been carried out in North America and the UK, there is a risk that the second-order theory has been unduly biased towards culturally-specific first-order models. Thus, investigations of first-order concepts can help to refine the second-order definitions by identifying core elements that are shared across different cultures.

Additional arguments for adopting a first-order approach in (im)politeness study include the fact that it requires the researcher to analyze (im)politeness as social practice and therefore to focus on actual interactions and interpret the interactions from the perspective of those participating. This also means that the researcher recognizes the discursive struggle surrounding concepts of (im)politeness: evaluations are not necessarily shared among participants. In turn, this can inform debates at the second-order level, such as the scope of “rudeness” vs. “impoliteness” (see Culpeper 2011: 71–72).

In understanding the first-order construct, Eelen (2001: 35) further breaks down the concept into three elements: *expressive politeness*<sup>1</sup> which refers to politeness encoded in speech, *classificatory politeness*<sup>1</sup>, which refers to judgments made about (im)politeness, and *metapragmatic politeness*<sup>1</sup>, which refers to talk about the concept of politeness.

## 1.2 First-order and second-order irony and sarcasm

With reference to the specific areas of irony and sarcasm, the distinction is equally salient because, like politeness, sarcasm and irony are both first-order and second-order concepts. Indeed, Attardo (2013: 40) concludes that the difficulty in differentiating irony and sarcasm in academic discussion is due to the fact they are folk concepts. This indicates the “slippage” between first-order and second-order concepts of irony and sarcasm which is manifest in a number of ways in the field. First, as discussed below, several studies of irony and sarcasm do not explain how they defined and then operationalized the concept

of irony or sarcasm leaving open the possibility that they relied on their first-order notions. Second, regarding the metalanguage, some researchers use the terms *irony* and *sarcasm* when eliciting either opinions or speech events from participants. For instance, Jorgensen (1996: 617 emphasis mine) details how participants in a project “were asked to recall instances when they made *sarcastic* remarks and to describe the most typical instance they could clearly remember”. This approach assumes that the participants’ first-order concept of sarcastic is the same as the second-order construct that the researcher is investigating. It is particularly striking that this assumption is made even though gaps between the two have begun to be discussed in the field (e.g., Creusere 1999) and previous research has also described regional differences in first-order concepts (Dress et al. 2008) and proposed that we are currently witnessing a semantic shift in North American English (Attardo 2013). If these variations are taken seriously, then it is logically impossible for the second-order concept to map onto all first-order concepts. Furthermore, the use of irony or sarcasm in these elicitation tasks does not account for other first-order terms which might be used to refer to the second-order concept, for instance Taylor (forthcoming) shows how *bitchy* is used to describe the same behavior as *sarcastic* in UK forum data when the person performing the behavior is female.

Recently, Dynel (2016: 229) has distinguished between the two at this level of folk vs. academic concept, asserting that “irony is a rhetorical figure known since ancient times [...] whilst sarcasm is a folk concept”. If sarcasm is to be conceptualized as a first-order concept, then this is something which belongs to a community, and so it becomes crucial to know whose folk concept is being discussed in any study.

## 2 Theorization of the relationship between irony/sarcasm in previous research

### 2.1 Disputes

The lack of agreement regarding the nature of the relationship between irony and sarcasm has led to three main approaches in constructing a relationship between the two. In the first, the two are “conflated” (in Cheang and Pell’s 2008 terms), as for instance in Attardo et al. (2003), who state that they use “the terms “irony” and “sarcasm” interchangeably [...] in part, because there seems to be no way of differentiating reliably between the two phenomena”

(2003: 243). However, as Cresuere (1999) points out, the result is that “consequently, the constructs being investigated are often not clearly defined” (1999: 257). Indeed, Kreuz (2000) criticizes this conceptual ambiguity as one of three simplifying assumptions in the field that should be challenged (see also Marchetti, Masaro and Valle 2007).

In the second approach, irony and sarcasm are considered to be distinct and related in a co-hyponymous relationship, for instance Lee and Katz (1998) see them both as sub-types of figurative language. However, in many instances, (e.g., Querini and Lubrani 2004), the shared superordinate is not specified, thus it is not clear of what they are sub-types.

In the third approach, the two terms/concepts are seen as being related in a hypernym-hyponym relationship, usually with sarcasm presented as a sub-type of irony. For instance, Alba-Juez and Attardo (2014: 100) define sarcasm as *negative irony*, that is, “where an apparently positive comment expresses a negative criticism or judgment of a person, a thing or a situation”. Gibbs (2000) too considers sarcasm to be one of five sub-types of irony, although in this case the others are: jocularity, rhetorical questions, hyperbole and understatement, again showing the lack of agreement in the field.

## 2.2 Points of comparison

Despite this lack of agreement, there are a number of points which recur in discussion of sarcasm and irony to date and here I attempt to synthesize what emerged as the key characteristics when surveying the field. These are the evaluation of irony and sarcasm and the evaluative functions which they perform; the facework functions; the presence of mismatch.

### 2.2.1 Evaluation

Evaluation has been central to the academic conceptualizations of irony from Grice (1978) onwards. In Dynel’s (2013) overview, evaluation is named as “the second definitional component of irony, next to flouting the first maxim of Quality” (2013: 422) and in recent models of irony, evaluation is conceptualized as its core. For instance, Partington (2006, 2007) argues for understanding irony as the reversal of the evaluative meaning of an utterance. Similarly, Burgers et al. (2011: 190) operationalize irony as “an utterance with a literal evaluation that is implicitly contrary to its intended evaluation” (see also Alba-Juez and Attardo 2014).

The polarity of evaluation is also assumed to be shared, once again following Grice, who tells us that “[i]rony is intimately connected with the expression of feeling, attitude, or evaluation. I cannot say something ironically unless what I say is intended to reflect a hostile or derogatory judgement or a feeling such as indignation or contempt” (Grice 1978: 124). Thus, it is not just evaluation, but negative evaluation that primarily characterizes irony and sarcasm in the theoretical conceptualization, as argued in Sperber and Wilson (1981).<sup>1</sup>

A different aspect of evaluation relates not to the attitude which is expressed by irony and sarcasm, but how they are evaluated. For instance, Culpeper (1996: 357) notes that, in his model of impoliteness, the term “sarcasm” was preferred to “irony” (Leech’s 1983 choice of term) for describing mock politeness, because irony has a more positive set of associations (see also Lee and Katz 1998; Partington 2006; Attardo 2013 for more on irony as more favorably evaluated than sarcasm).

### 2.2.2 Facework

The discussion of evaluation has already touched on facework because of the tendency for irony and sarcasm to express a negative attitude. Both Leech (1983) and Brown and Levinson (1987) viewed irony as (potentially) a face-saving strategy by allowing the hearer to arrive at the offensive point indirectly, thus mitigating the face threat (see also Kumon-Nakamura et al. 1995). Further evidence for the face-saving function for irony comes from Dews et al. (1995) who carried out three experiments and found that their subjects rated ironic criticisms as less harsh than direct criticism.

Research has also highlighted the *speaker* face-saving and face-enhancement potential for both forms. For instance, Nuolijarvi and Tiittula (2011: 584) note how “[i]ronizing the opponent can thus be a means to improve one’s own position” in political debates. Leech notes a face-enhancement potential too, stating that:

irony tends to be more complex, ingenious, witty and/or entertaining than a straight piece of impoliteness. An advantage of this is that it boosts the face of the ironist while attacking the face of the target (Leech, 2014: 235).

Similarly, both Jorgensen (1996) Huang et al. (2015) found that sarcasm was less likely to result in negative feelings towards the speaker. For Barbe (1995),

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<sup>1</sup> Although this seems to be countered by the use of irony to express positive evaluation, Garmendia (2014) argues that even this form carries a negative evaluation.

the speaker face-saving role becomes a means of distinguishing between irony and sarcasm and she proposed that:

Sarcastic utterances perhaps differ from ironic utterances in the following points. (i) The utterance is more personal, and (ii) its sarcastic potential is immediately obvious to all participants in a situation, i.e., shared experience and knowledge is not a necessary factor. (iii) Nevertheless, the utterance still has a face-saving capacity, but only for the hearer and not for the speaker. That is, a hearer can decide to ignore the sarcasm. (Barbe 1995: 28)

Self-deprecating irony may also play a role in speaker face-saving (Lee and Katz 1998). Dews et al. (1995: 365) comment on this more explicitly, stating that “when people make comments about unpleasant situations that are out of their control, the payoffs [...] for commenting ironically were that the remark is perceived as humorous and it has a less negative impact on the speaker-hearer relationship”. Furthermore, they report that impact was more positive for the ironic variant than for literal remarks because such formulations “made light” of the situation, rather than “bringing down” the mood of the addressee.

Irony and sarcasm may also be used for *other* face-enhancement, as for instance when irony is used to express positive evaluations (e.g., ironic compliments). However, perhaps the most salient aspect of mutual face-enhancement is the signaling of common ground and alignment between participants, thus enhancing the face of both the speaker and the hearer. The creation of solidarity (Haiman 1998) may occur in one of two ways. In the first, there is bonding over a particular target, as Gibbs suggests “a good deal of ironic language enables speakers to bond together through their disparagement of some other person” (Gibbs 2000: 7). In the second, solidarity is achieved through banter, for instance Alvarado Ortega’s (2013) analysis of naturally occurring interactions in conversational peninsular Spanish concludes that irony primarily fulfils a solidarity function, acting as mock impoliteness (mock mock politeness in Bousfield’s [2008] terms, also discussed in Brown 2013).

Finally, given that irony and sarcasm are strongly associated with the expression of negative evaluation, a function of face-attack may be anticipated. Even regarding irony, the earlier findings or assumptions that the function of irony is to lessen offence or avoid committing an FTA (face threatening act) have been challenged. For instance, Colston (1997) found that in instances of “ironic criticism”, irony actually enhanced the perceived criticism.

As mentioned above, the analysis of facework has also served as a means for distinguishing between irony and sarcasm. Sarcasm is reported to present a greater face threat due to evaluations of appropriacy and intentionality (e.g., Averbek 2013) and lack of deniability (Barbe 1995). The presence of a “target”



for the sarcastic utterances is also frequently cited as a differentiating feature between irony and sarcasm. For instance, Wilson and Sperber (2012: 141) state that “[i]rony is directly targeted at attributed thoughts, and may be indirectly targeted, particularly in sarcasm, at the people, or type of people, who entertain such thoughts or take them seriously”. Moreover, Lee and Katz (1998) found a stronger identification with sarcasm if the target of the echoic reminder was not the speaker her/himself (see also Littman and Mey 1991; Haiman 1998).

### 2.2.3 Mismatch

Mismatch has been a central concept for understanding both irony and sarcasm in terms of hypothesized cognitive structures, the linguistic structure of the ironic/sarcastic utterance, and as a contextualization cue (Gumperz 1992) for ironic intention. All the major theories of irony/sarcasm processing rely on mismatch, from propositional mismatch between what is said and what is meant (e.g., Grice 1975; Colebrook 2004), to mismatch between the proposition which is echoed and the speaker’s attitude to it (e.g., Sperber and Wilson 1986), to the more recent focus on a mismatch or reversal of evaluations (Partington 2006, 2007). This shared grounding in mismatch is emphasized by Garmendia (2014: 648, emphasis mine) who urges that “instead of trying to accommodate the strong notions of echo, opposition, and pretence into the vast variety of ironic examples, let us accept that what ties together all instances of irony is something more basic – an *overt clash* between contents”. Thus we can see that mismatch is presented as a shared, not distinguishing, feature of irony and sarcasm. One recent challenge to this consensus is Dynel (2015: 343) who argues that “sarcasm need not manifest the features which are the hallmarks of irony. Sarcasm does not reside in meaning opposition and does not need to convey the critical evaluation via implicature”. Thus, in the following analysis, I attempt to tease out how the first-order use relates to these different descriptions and expectations.

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 First-order metalanguage approaches

The first-order approach taken in this paper responds to two methodological limitations in contemporary irony/sarcasm research. The first is the criticism

that “irony has seldom been studied in live interaction” (Kotthoff, 2003: 1392) and that the “majority of irony models are illustrated with fictional examples devised by researchers to illustrate their theses” (Dynel 2007: 1815). In a recent survey of over 50 papers on irony and sarcasm (Taylor 2016), two-thirds did not use any naturally-occurring data.

The second challenge to which a first-order approach responds, relates to the identification of irony/sarcasm, as Partington explains:

In very many studies in the field, the examples discussed, whether invented or selected, are taken for granted as being ironic for no other reason than that the author intuitively feels them to be so. Any discussion of irony based upon data which has not been previously validated as ironic runs the risk of being both oversubjective and circular. (Partington 2007: 1550)

In the same review mentioned above, it was found that 37% of the surveyed papers gave absolutely no account of how irony/sarcasm had been operationalized and identified. Furthermore, in 22% of cases, the researcher gave an account but this was not related to research or previous theory. Such vagueness and under-specification has serious implications for the internal reliability and replicability of the studies. Furthermore, even where the definition and operationalization is made transparent, when the researcher decides *a priori* s/he restricts the analysis to what s/he already knows which may not be appropriate in all stages of a project. As Kreuz (2000) puts it:

this methodology will only allow researchers to find (or fail to find) what they are looking for. For example, if a researcher assumes that ironic statements must be counterfactual, then he or she will not bother to collect or analyse irony ratings of veridical statements. By defining a phenomenon beforehand, researchers run the risk of creating myopic theories that do not do justice to the richness of their subject. (Kreuz 2000: 101)

In this study, the identification of what is to be discussed as irony or sarcasm lies in the metapragmatic comments made by participants in naturally occurring interactions. More specifically, I focus on the central terms *irony*, *ironic*, *sarcasm* and *sarcastic* as a way of investigating the relationship between the first and second-order uses of these labels.

The most extensive first-order, metalanguage approach in this area to date is Partington’s highly innovative study (discussed in 2006, 2007, 2011) which focusses in particular on the labels “irony”/“ironic”. Following Barbe (1993), Partington refers to instances which contain one of these metacomments as “explicit irony” and this is contrasted with “implicit irony” (an utterance which is considered ironic but is not labelled as such) and “phrasal irony” (the reversal of collocational patterns). One problem with creating a category of “explicit

irony” is that the terms “irony”, “ironic”, “ironically” are not actually markers of irony, but are indicators of an evaluative judgement. As both Barbe and Partington show, the speaker frequently uses the label to impose an ironic reading on an event. In effect, this “type” is actually a first-order reference to irony and indeed, despite the naming choice, this is how Partington uses these meta-comments; the situations labelled as “ironic” were analyzed in order to derive his working definition of irony, which is that irony involves the reversal of evaluation. In both Partington’s (2006) and Barbe’s (1993, 1995) work, searching for “irony” or “ironic” retrieved situational irony, not instances where the speaker was reporting events of verbal irony. However, in part this is likely to be driven by the text types which they used. Barbe’s (1993, 1995) metalanguage study of irony/ironic used the genre of *Letters to the Editor* in newspapers, and Partington also made use of newspaper language by examining occurrences in a corpus of British broadsheet newspapers. The aim of this study is to use occurrences of the metalanguage in conversational data to identify verbal irony events which can then be analyzed. As Barros-Garcia and Terkourafi argue with respect to politeness, more than one type of data is required:

For a better understanding of both “orders” of politeness, then, it is necessary to combine two types of data: (1) metapragmatic data enabling access to lay speakers’ definitions of politeness and their views about the need for politeness in different contexts; and (2) observational data of their behavior with respect to politeness in different contexts. (Barros-Garcia and Terkourafi 2015: 233)

### 3.2 Criticism of first-order metalanguage approaches

In general terms then, the first-order metalanguage approach may be seen to be advantageous because it leads the researcher to look at attested speech events, avoids the researcher’s paradox of deciding what constitutes the object of study before commencing the research, and provides a replicable methodology for the investigation.

However, there have been some criticisms of this type of first-order metalanguage study. First of all, an indisputable limitation is that a large dataset is needed. To take an example, when Partington (2006) expanded his study of “irony”/“ironical”/“ironically” from a newspaper corpus to a corpus of White House press briefings he found just nine metacomments in the six million word corpus (2006: 193). Second, it is not the case that every occurrence of irony/sarcasm (in any second-order sense) will be explicitly labelled as such. Thus, what I do in this study is examine what actually gets labelled as ironic or sarcastic. I do not claim to identify all instances that could have been labelled

as such. It has also been suggested that certain behaviors may be labelled more frequently than others, skewing the reported proportions. For instance Burgers et al. (2011) and Dynel (2014) suggest that a metalanguage approach is more likely to retrieve situational irony rather than verbal irony. This would be a valid finding in itself, if empirically proven, because it tells us that situational irony is more central to the first-order concept of irony. The last criticism of first-order approaches challenges the direction of discursive approaches to (im)politeness by arguing that lay perspectives are not fruitful for analysis precisely because they will be more diverse, representing multiple viewpoints. For instance, Burgers et al. (2011: 187) criticize such approaches on the basis that “the word “irony” can mean different things to different people [which] means that an utterance that one speaker calls “ironic” may not necessarily adhere to the definition of irony that a researcher has”. Similarly, Dynel (2014: 620) rejects the approach on the basis that “this strategy relies on lay language users’ perception of irony, which may be divergent from the scholarly perspective and which need not involve the trope”. In both instances, the assumption seems to be that the researcher’s second-order concept is “true” while the first-order understandings and usages are deviant. This is an argument which could be more readily accepted if it were shown that the academic constructs of sarcasm and irony are not, in fact, lay descriptions in scholarly clothing.

### 3.3 The corpus

The data used here comes from two internet forums, one based in the UK (mumsnet.com) and one in Italy (alfemminile.com). These comparable data sources were chosen because they allow the analysis of informal conversation without losing situational context features or paralinguistic information. Furthermore, there is no observer effect as the conversations took place independently of the researcher. An important feature of the datasets is that they are in different languages (English and Italian) and from different countries. The rationale for selecting data from two languages and countries was to enhance the comparison of first-order usage with the existing academic description. One particular risk of the first and second-order slippage is that what is presented as second-order theory of irony and sarcasm is heavily based on first-order understandings which are specific to the particular culture where the research has been carried out (most commonly North America). While clearly two samples are not sufficient to generalize about first-order use of irony, they represent a starting point in tackling the relationship between first and second-order descriptions of the subject.

The corpora were compiled using the free software BootCat (Baroni and Bernardini 2004), which gathers entire webpages from the internet using search words (which in this case included “irony”, “ironic”, “sarcasm” and “sarcastic” and Italian equivalents).<sup>2</sup> This process created corpora of 61 million tokens for the UK forum and 35 million tokens for the Italian forum.

In order to investigate how these terms were used and what kinds of behaviors they described, each occurrence which referred to a person was located and annotated according to a range of features. In total, 790 metapragmatic sarcastic/ironic labels which referred to people’s behaviors were identified. These described both events that occurred within the forum and events which participants were describing from their life outside the forum. Of relevance to this study, the occurrences were annotated according to: whether the term was used to describe the speaker him/herself or some other person; whether the behavior was evaluated positively or negatively by the person describing the event; whether there was a human target for the sarcastic/ironic utterance; what facework was involved (using Spencer-Oatey’s 2000 model of face); whether the sarcastic/ironic utterance involved any of the kinds of mismatch discussed above; whether the mismatch was explicit in the co-text, or only understandable from the context.

## 4 (non) interchangeability of the metapragmatic labels

In this first section, I address the classificatory and metapragmatic aspects of irony and sarcasm by examining how people talk about these terms together and by investigating the collocates of these terms.

### 4.1 Overt discussion of ironic and sarcastic

The relationship between irony and sarcasm was the subject of limited meta-discussion in the forums; there were just six co-occurrences within a ten-word span in the English data and twenty-three co-occurrences in the Italian data. All co-occurrences in the English data treated *irony/ironic* and *sarcasm/sarcastic*

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<sup>2</sup> *Ironic* was preferred over *ironical* because it is used more frequently (*ironic* occurs with a frequency of 4.6 per million words [pmw] compared to 0.2 pmw in EnTenTen), the same applies to *sarky*, although this would be interesting to examine in future work.

as similar and they appeared as instances of coordinated synonymy (Storjohann 2010): linked through coordinating conjunctions, presentation in lists, or graphologically, as in (1).<sup>3</sup>

(1) is there not a sense of **sarcasm/irony**/whatever it's called in it?

This was also the dominant pattern for the Italian data, showing that there is little sense of contrast in how people explicitly relate the two. The next stage investigated whether this conscious association matches attested use.

## 4.2 Ironic and sarcastic in a distributional thesaurus

Using the Sketch Engine thesaurus function (Rychly and Kilgarriff 2007) it is possible to use the collocates, i.e., those items that relate to the node in a syntagmatic relationship, to identify items which potentially relate to the node paradigmatically. Thus, the items listed by the thesaurus program are those which occur within similar lexical environments to ironic or sarcastic.<sup>4</sup> The results are shown in Table 1, lexical items with a favorable evaluation are underlined and items with an unfavorable evaluation are emphasized in bold.

It is particularly revealing that *ironic* and *sarcastic* do not appear as possible substitutes for one another in the English data whereas they are the items that behave in the most similar way for the Italian data (shown by the position at the top of the table). The thesaurus entries show a greater number of unfavorable items in the columns for *sarcastic*/SARCASTICO as compared to *ironic*/IRONICO for both languages (as in Partington's 2006 corpus study).<sup>5</sup> However, there were differences across languages. First, it is noticeable that in the English data there are very few favorable items (underlined in the table) in the *ironic* list, other than *relieved*. This is in contrast to the Italian data where there were many favorable items in the list for IRONICO, such as *simpatico* 'friendly/nice', *intelligente* 'intelligent' and so on. Second, in the Italian data there were two clearly favorable items in the list for SARCASTICO: *scherzoso* 'joking/ly' and *divertente* 'funny'. Third, *divertente* 'entertaining' occurs for both IRONICO and SARCASTICO, while there was nothing similar indicating humor in the English

<sup>3</sup> All examples are reproduced faithfully, including non-standard spelling etc. Bold added throughout to highlight the lexical items under discussion.

<sup>4</sup> The default setting of minimum similarity was used; the first twenty as ranked by statistical significance are shown here. Full details are available in Rychly and Kilgarriff (2007).

<sup>5</sup> Small caps are used to indicate that the lemma was used, so SARCASTICO encompasses *sarcastica*, *sarcastico*, *sarcastiche*, *sarcastici*.

**Table 1:** Thesaurus results for ironic/ironico and sarcastic/sarcastico.

ironic	ironico	sarcastic	sarcastico
relieved	sarcastico [sarcastic]	uncalled	ironico [ironic]
off-putting	simpatico [nice, friendly]	dismissive	scherzoso [joking]
flippant	intelligente [intelligent]	flippant	offensivo [offensive]
derogatory	scherzoso [joking]	bitchy	aggressivo [aggressive]
disappointing	sincere [sincere]	snide	spiritoso [witty, funny]
peculiar	interessante [interesting]	tactful	pungente [cutting]
alarming	dolce [sweet]	condescending	ossessivo [obsessive]
tenuous	gentile [kind, polite]	tactless	standard
ambivalent	carino [cute, kind]	nosey	acido [acidic]
astonishing	divertente [funny, amusing]	soppy	divertente [funny, amusing]
lacking	delicato [delicate]	thoughtless	imbarazzante [embarrassing]
frightening	brillante [brilliant]	hopeful	provocante [provocative]
tricksy	offensivo [offensive]	intrusive	stupido [stupid]
erm	socievole [sociable]	unkind	rispettoso [respectful]
daunting	stupido [stupid]	judgemental	violento [violent]
restrictive	aperto [open]	uncooperative	capriccioso [fickle, unpredictable]
HE	rispettoso [respectful]	manipulative	solito [usual]
insistent	sensibile [sensitive]	unhelpful	categorico [categorical]
confrontational	competente [competente]	unprofessional	razzista [racist]
unconventional	comprensivo [understanding]	vulgar	malizioso [crafty, mischievous]

data. Fourth, in the English data, both *ironic* and *sarcastic* seem more likely to be associated with performance of mismatch (e.g., *flippant*, *uncalled for*, *condescending*).

These results from the corpus study suggest that that the first-order concepts are not the same in the English and Italian data and thus they relate to the second-order concepts in different ways. They also indicate that although sarcasm and irony are clearly conceptually related for the users of the UK forum, they not actually used in similar ways. This finding is corroborated by a survey reported in Taylor (forthcoming) in which 233 participants were asked to complete sentences from which the word “sarcastic” had been removed. In total, 75 different terms were suggested to fill the gap left by “sarcastic” and the most frequent were: “sarcastic” (61), “condescending” (9), “annoyed” (8), “grumpy” (8), “angry” (7) and “patronizing” (7). “Ironic” was not suggested once in the 233 completions.

## 5 The behaviors labelled as ironic/*IRONICO* and sarcastic/*SARCASTICO*

In this section, I move from looking at the terms themselves, to the behaviors which were labelled as “ironic” or “sarcastic”. In Eelen’s (2001) terms, this involves focusing on the *expressive* and *classificatory* elements of the first order constructs.

This consideration of the actual behaviors labelled as *ironic* etc. is where this study goes beyond previous metalanguage studies of irony and sarcasm (e.g., Barbe 1993, 1995; Partington 2006, 2007). The analysis centers on the three key aspects introduced in Section 2: evaluation, facework and mismatch. In each section, I note which aspects are similar for both the English and Italian datasets and how these relate to the second-order expectations, and then move on to examine features which are characteristic of only one of the datasets and what this can tell us about the first/second-order relationships.

### 5.1 Evaluation

#### 5.1.1 Evaluation offered by the utterance

In the English data, the verbal behaviors which were described as *ironic* and *sarcastic* always involved the expression of some negative evaluation, as illustrated in (2).<sup>6</sup>

- (2) I usually say a **sarcastic** “my pleasure” or somesuch when people ignore the door-holding etc. But I still ahve the (intensely petty overreaction) of wanting to dismember them with a rusty spoon.

That is not to say that they had the primary function of face attack, but all occurrences involved criticism of some behavior, idea etc., thus strongly demonstrating the *characteristic attitude* posited in Wilson and Sperber (2012) and Wilson (2013). The same pattern was found for the verbal behaviors evaluated as *SARCASTICO* in the Italian data.

However, in the case of *IRONICO*, while 78 % of behaviors expressed negative evaluation 22 % did not. Those behaviors which did not involve the expression of any negative emotion mainly referred to flirting and sexually charged

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<sup>6</sup> In order to represent the data faithfully, the extracts have not been edited for typos etc.



behaviors, shown in (3), or, less frequently, to instances where the *IRONICO* label simply seemed to mark a non-serious aspect to the behavior.

- (3) Buongiorno Ing. X dico con **un toco molto ironico** sottolineando il titolo Ing. Buongiorno a lei mi risponde con **un tono altrettanto ironico** a dimostrare inutile formalità che ho voluto creare, visto che ci davamo del tu già dal primo incontro  
 [Good morning Dr. X I say **with a very ironic tone** emphasizing the title Dr. Good morning to you he answers with **an equally ironic tone** showing the needless formality that I had created, seeing as we had been using the informal “tu” since our first meeting]

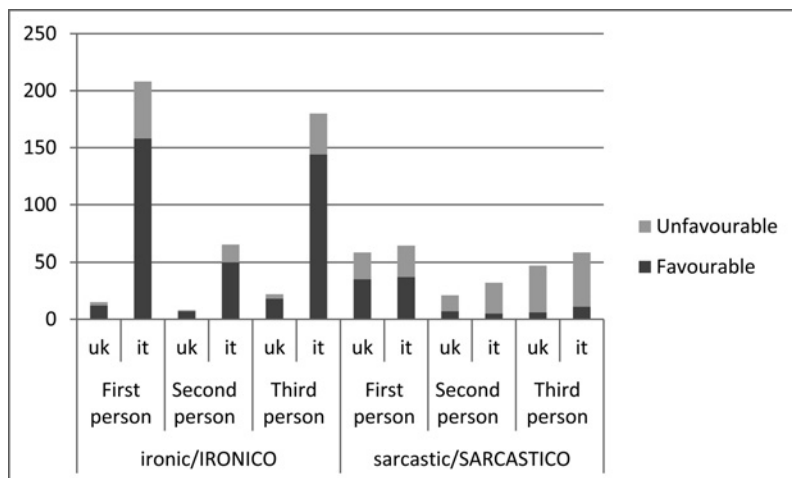
As can be seen, there is no clear expression of negative attitude, the ironic element serves to create some distance from sincerity or disassociation from the formality and to mark a non-serious aspect to the behavior. Thus, it seems that the Italian first-order usage does not consistently match up to the critical expectations of second-order descriptions outlined in Section 2.

### 5.1.2 Evaluation of ironic/sarcastic behavior

Regarding what evaluation is made of the ironic or sarcastic behavior, Figure 1 shows who was evaluated (the speaker her/himself is labelled as first person; an interlocutor is labelled as second person; any other role is labelled as third person) and how they were evaluated (favorably/positively or unfavorably/negatively).

Perhaps the first point to note here is that speakers in both corpora comment on their own behavior, contrasting with Partington’s claim (based on a corpus of newspaper language) that speakers are not likely to self-identify as *sarcastic*, preferring the label *ironic* for the same behavior (Partington 2006: 217). Indeed, Figure 1 shows that speakers actually more frequently self-identify as *sarcastic* than *ironic* in the English data.

Figure 1 also highlights the variation in frequency for *ironic* and *IRONICO*, and this is the result of a significant difference between the British English and Italian forum usage: in the English data, most occurrences (68 %) labelled a situation as *ironic* (as predicted by Burgers et al. 2011 and Dynel 2014) and so are not included in this study of behaviors. In this tendency to label situations, rather than people’s behavior, we can see evidence of the sarcastic/ironic distinction made by Haiman (1998: 20), among others, that “situations may be ironic, but only people can be sarcastic”. However, this association is chal-



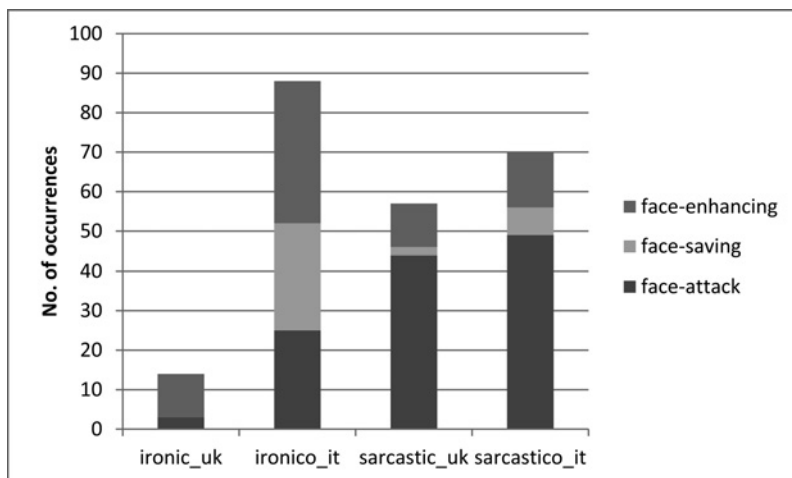
**Figure 1:** Who is evaluated as being *sarcastic/ironic* and how are they evaluated?

lenged by the Italian data, where fewer than 3 % of the occurrences involved describing a situation, rather than a person's behavior, as *IRONICO*. As in the previous section, there seems to be a greater distance between the Italian first-order usage and the second-order descriptions than the English first-order descriptions which may point towards an Anglo-centric bias in the second-order theory.

In line with the findings from the collocation analysis and second-order theory, the evaluation of *ironic* and *IRONICO* shown in Figure 1 is mainly favorable (although the numbers are very low for the English data). The evaluations for *sarcastic* and *SARCASTICO* are similar; as can be seen, the speaker was most likely to favorably appraise being sarcastic (shown in dark grey) when it referred to their own behavior, while the majority of references to other participants involved a negative evaluation (shown in light grey). This illustrates how it is too simplistic to simply say sarcasm is evaluated negatively in the first-order conceptualization, instead it is the participation role that determines the evaluation, as hypothesized by Bowes and Katz (2011).

## 5.2 Facework

The type of facework that the speaker seemed to be prioritizing is summarized in Figure 2. As can be seen, there is a greater perception of face-attack in the behaviors described as *sarcastic* or *SARCASTICO*, as predicted by the second-



**Figure 2:** Facework prioritised in descriptions of behaviours.

order theory, but face-attack is also present for *ironic* and IRONICO. It is also marked that face-saving, a major function according to second-order politeness theory (e.g., Leech 1983; Brown and Levinson 1987) and much research from irony studies (e.g., Barbe 1995), is not the dominant function for either *ironic* or IRONICO.

### 5.2.1 Face-saving

As Figure 2 shows, face-saving (marked in light grey) was less frequent than might have been expected. From the literature discussed above (e.g., Leech 1983; Kumon-Nakamura et al. 1995), we might have expected this to be a primary use of *ironic* and, to a lesser extent, *sarcastic* behavior. However, even at its most frequent, in the behaviors labelled with the Italian IRONICO, (shown in example 4), this function only accounts for 31% of the speech events, and in the English occurrences of *ironic* there were no instances where the speakers reference face-saving as a main reason for using irony.

- (4) Thread title: Sono troppo gelosa e sto rovinando tutto, per favore aiutatemi...

[I'm too jealous and I'm ruining everything, please help me...]

Poster F: siccome io sono nella tua stessa barca , ti consiglio di dosarti... cioè sbotta solo per i casi necessari , cioè quando una è sospetta , non a

priori ..e poi **prova ad essere ironica** , cioè **sdrammatizza** sul tuo “difetto” magari buttandola sul ridere, cioè lo dici ma simpaticamente.. vedrai che alleggerenzo la prende meglio.

[as I'm in the same situation, I advise you to control yourself.. like speak up only when needed, like when there is something suspicious, not a priori.. and then **try to be ironic**, like try **to play down** your “defect” maybe making him laugh, like you say it but in a funny way... you'll see that lightening up he'll take it better]

In example (4) the speaker is negotiating an expression of jealousy, in which the speaker is constrained by the need to criticize the other person's quality and relational face (representing them as the kind of person/partner who is potentially unfaithful) without damaging their own face and threatening the rapport. The recommended tool for negotiating this tension is irony, used to play down the speaker's jealousy, and this “playing down” or “light-hearted” aspect was important in the Italian data, particularly with reference to self-face saving.

In the behaviors described as *SARCASTICO/sarcastic*, Figure 2 shows that there was little evidence that these involved mitigating face attack, as anticipated from second-order theorization. In the UK data, where face-saving was referenced, the focus was to save the face of the person performing the *sarcastic* behavior. For instance, in (5), the use of sarcasm is recommended by the writer because it will allow the speaker to save face by appearing more in control (see, for instance, Duguid 2011; Partington et. al 2013 on the importance of control for evaluation).<sup>7</sup>

- (5) Always sounds more **sarcastic** and don't mess with me if you can avoid shouting – shows you are in control and she hasn't ruffled you. Losing your temper will probably induce eye-rolling and not necessarily make her stop.

In the Italian data, just 12% of the occurrences acknowledged some mitigation. These predominately (five out of the seven) referred to indirectness in behavior (shown in 6).

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, expressing aggression while maintaining control is what makes implicational impoliteness (Culpeper 2011) generally so central to institutional and public discourse types such as political interviews (Mullany 2002), parliamentary discourse (Piirainen-Marsh 2005; Ilie 2004) and courtroom discourse (Harris 2011; Taylor 2011). However, as we see here, this function carries over into everyday conversational contexts and this was also noted in both languages.

- (6) una famosa neurologa di un famoso centro cefalee un giorno mi ha detto che secondo lei ero io che esageravo(con dieci crisi di seguitooooo!)che alla fine si tratta di un banale mal di testa,che dovevi prima risolvere i miei problemi esistenziali e POI avrei risolto anche le crisi... la tentazione iniziale è stata quella di spaccarle la testa col martelletto per i rilfessi... tutto quello che ho fatto è stato alzarmi,dirle “vabbè,le far sapere come sto dopo la psicoterapia” **col mio migliore tono sarcastico** e andare via.... [a well-known neurologist in a well-known migraine specialist centre once told me that she thought I was exaggerating(with 10 attacks a day!)that in the end it was just a normal headache,that I need to sort out my existential problems and THEN I would have solved the attacks... my first reaction was to hit her over the head with the hammer for testing reflexes.. all I did was get up, say “fine,I will let you know how I am after the psychotherapy” **with my most sarcastic tone** and leave...]

While the sarcastic behavior in (6) is less face-attacking than the “desired” behavior which involves physical aggression (as in example 2), in line with Dews et al. (1995) and Bowes and Katz (2013), once again the scope is presented as primarily the protection of the speaker’s face. As in the English example, the person performing the behavior is showing that she can handle the situation and behave in socially acceptable ways, in other words maintaining control.

An additional salient category of face-saving which emerged only from the analysis of the Italian data (10 % of IRONICO utterances and 14 % of behaviors labelled as SARCASTICO) was that in which the speaker targeted him/herself, as illustrated in (7).

- (7) Ho già fatto 2 cicli di chemio, perso i capelli e messo il catetere centrale.....uno spasso!!! (**in modo sarcastico**).  
[I have already had two courses of treatment, lost my hair and had a catheter fitted... what fun!! (**meant sarcastically**)]

Although drawing attention to the speaker’s problems could have a (self) face-attacking effect, the cumulative effect is one of face-saving by allowing the speaker to express dissatisfaction with their situation while limiting risk to their face which may emerge from the act of complaining. The effect of this indirect style of evaluation or appraisal of their situation may be to lighten the effect of the “complaining” as a form of self-presentation, and the ideal/actual mismatch may additionally emphasize the difficulties they face. This function has previously been discussed with reference to irony (e.g., Dews et al. 1995; Lee

and Katz 1998; Brown 1995; Gibbs 2000) but not with reference to sarcasm and the frequency of use in the Italian data is higher than that for the north-American data reported in Gibbs (2000: 16).<sup>8</sup>

### 5.2.2 Face-enhancing

Face-enhancement, as shown in Figure 2, was a significant category of *ironic* (55 % of behaviors) and *IRONICO* (24 %). Clearly, there is overlap with the previous category of face-saving, but the practices that are considered in this section do not work around an unavoidable face attack.

The main scope for face-enhancement in the data considered here lies in the contextual mismatch, as Booth (1974: 33) states “ironic reconstructions depend on an appeal to assumptions, often unstated, that ironists and readers share”. Thus, in order for addressees or other beneficiaries to interpret an utterance as ironic (or sarcastic), they need to share some set of knowledge with the speaker. This means that the appreciation of an utterance as ironic or sarcastic holds potential for face enhancement because the speaker and hearer are claiming and recognizing common ground.

The most common practice for face enhancement in the two forums was through shared criticism, as illustrated in (8), and this occurred for *SARCASTICO/sarcastic* and *IRONICO/ironic*.

- (8) they're not exactly trying to help you much are they! can't believe they just expect you to keep going only now take all your marking home. Very generous to “consider” taking you off your duty (said in **sarcastic** way!). Urgh, they're really not making much of an effort to try and get you to stay on to work are they – surely they realise if they don't help you out now you'll just end out being too ill to work and they'll have to pay for someone else.

This shared disparagement (Gibbs 2000) partly explains how it is that all behaviors labelled as *SARCASTICO*, *sarcastic* or *ironic* involved the expression of negative opinion and yet the range of facework was much more varied. In some instances, the alignment with a hearer was made explicit through metacomments within the initial turn, as shown in (8), where the speaker places her criticism on record in the sentences either side of the sarcastic utterance. In

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<sup>8</sup> And this is despite the broad definition of irony that Gibbs (2000) was employing.

other instances, the sarcastic or ironic intent had not been marked within the initial utterance and the *sarcastic/ironic* label occur in repair sequences because the alignment had not been recognized. There is, therefore, some risk inherent in assuming common ground, thus leading to greater relational rewards when the ironic or sarcastic intent is successfully recognized.

### 5.2.3 Face-attack

Regarding *sarcastic/SARCASTICO*, Figure 2 showed that first-order use reflects the second-order expectations with face-attack (shown in dark grey) constituting the most frequent category. This is illustrated in (9), which is typical of the data in that it presents being sarcastic as an offensive counter strategy (Bousfield 2007).

- (9) I've found the best thing to do is to keep my family and issues to myself and not talk about anything really and bite my lip – although sometimes I give a **sarcastic** reply back when she says something **hurtful** and that seems to hit home.

However, Figure 2 also shows that second-order expectations are challenged with the presence of face-attack in the behaviors labelled as *ironic/IRONICO*, illustrated in (10).

- (10) Poster H: 🙄 ragazza.....fatti una camomilla.....non ho davvero altro da aggiungere!!!  
 questo è un forum pubblico e la gente ci scrive le proprie storie e vicende senza dover esser etichettata da una personcina a modo tale e quale a te..... come fake??? ma sei fuori???  
 per favore, non leggere e rispondere più ai miei post.....così non ti scandalizza....**baci e abbracci!!**  
 [🙄 girl.....get yourself a chamomile.... I really have nothing else to add!!!  
 This is a public forum and people write about their own experiences without having to be labelled by someone like you..... what do you mean fake??? Are you out of it??? Do me a favor, don't read or respond any more to my posts.... That way you won't be scandalized....**kisses and hugs!!**]  
 Poster F: 🐼👁️ [NAME] non sono una lei. la camomilla la bevo già. qua, come dici tu è un forum pubblico, per cui ci posto. non mi scandalizza quel che dici. solo che dici falsità e voglio che mio pensiero sia fatto per-

venire ai forumini e forumine oneste che navigano sul “al femminile”. **Baci e abbracci le rimando al mittente.**

[👤👤 (NAME) I'm not a she. I already drink chamomile. Like you say, this is a public forum, so I post. I'm not scandalized by what you write. Just that you write lies and I want my ideas to get through to the honest forum members who use “al femminile” Kisses and hugs I return to sender]

Poster H: 😡 adesso hai stufato.....posta dove ti pare, ma non nel mio post.....o se proprio vuoi farlo esprimi un parere o non un giudizio!!! scusa...in base a cosa ritieni che le mie parole siano falsità???? se non l'avessi capito..il **baci e abbracci era ben più che ironico.....** 😊

[😡 now you are getting really annoying... post where you want but not in my thread... or if you must do it, express an opinion not a judgement!!! Sorry... but on what grounds do you think I was lying???? If you didn't get it... **the kisses and hugs was more than ironic.....** 😊]

In (10), we see that the repair in the final turn involves the first speaker re-asserting the face-attack by drawing attention to the non-sincere status of the *baci e abbracci* ‘kisses and hugs’. Thus we can conclude that, for the speaker, face attack was a salient part of the IRONICO utterance and the accumulation of similar occurrences, shown in Figure 2, indicates that this is a pattern in *ironic*/IRONICO behaviors.

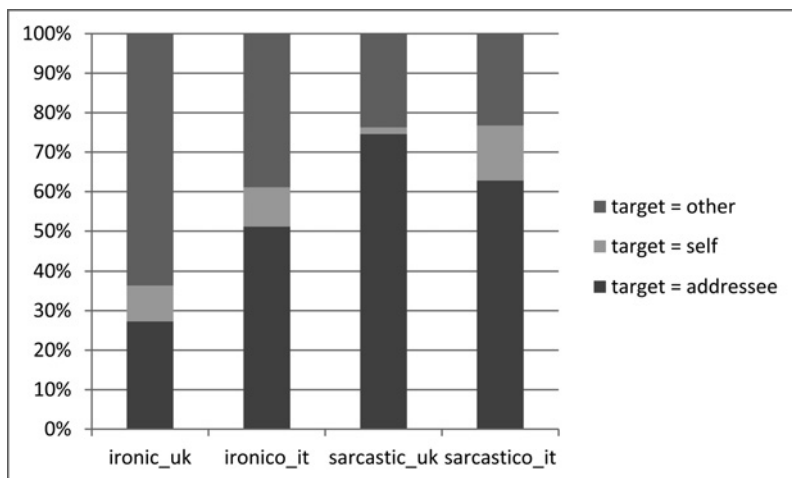
#### 5.2.4 Who is the target?

To focus in more detail on the correlation of an unfavorably appraised “target” with sarcastic utterances (e.g., as hypothesized in Lee and Katz 1998; Camp 2011), Figures 3 summarizes who was the (perceived) target in each behavior.

As can be seen, for both the English and Italian data, there is a stronger pattern of association between the use of SARCASTICO/*sarcastic* and utterances which involve targeting an addressee, thus reflecting cohesion between first and second-order conceptualizations (cf. Kreuz and Glucksberg 1989; Lee and Katz 1998). Closer analysis showed the influence of the participation role as targeting of an addressee was evaluated exclusively in negative terms when performed by a third person and mostly positively when performed by the speaker (74 % of *sarcastic* occurrences and 93 % of SARCASTICO occurrences in this category).

The targeting of the speaker him/herself (shown in light grey in Figure 3) in the sarcastic behaviors was more frequent in the Italian data, and as discussed above frequently fulfilled a face-saving function. This contrasts with





**Figure 3:** The (perceived) target of utterances.

Sperber and Wilson's (1991/1981) proposal that if the target is the speaker, then the trope is more likely to be irony, while sarcasm is more likely to involve echoing another's utterance, and again may point towards the extent to which the second-order theorization has depended on an Anglo-centric model or baseline.

The patterns in the behaviors labelled as *ironic* are less clear because there were so few recoverable behaviors but the target was more likely to be some other person, in line with second-order expectations. In contrast, in the Italian data for *IRONICO*, Figure 3 shows that there is still a pattern of targeting an addressee. As for both *sarcastic* and *SARCASTICO* this is evaluated favorably when performed by the speaker and negatively when performed by some other participant, again showing the importance of the participation role.

## 5.3 Mismatch

### 5.3.1 Absence of mismatch

Figure 4 summarizes the frequency and type of mismatch in the behaviors labelled as *ironic* and *sarcastic*. The sections relating to mismatch are coloured in grey shades and the section indicating no mismatch is left in white for con-

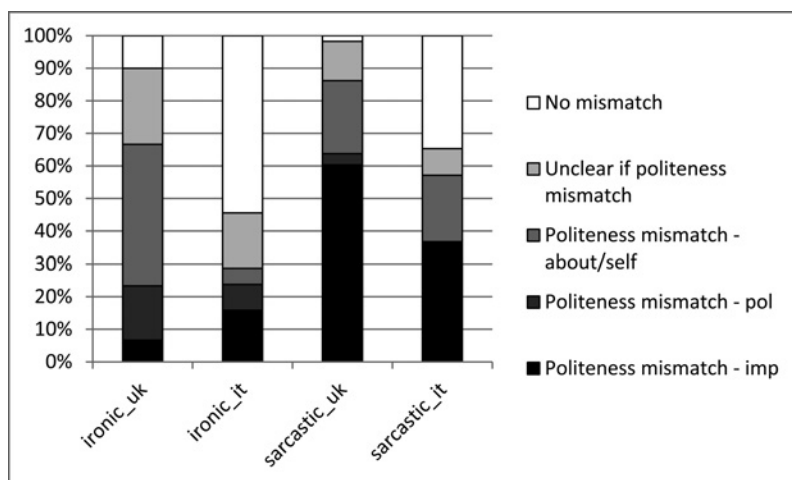


Figure 4: Frequency of mismatch.

trast.<sup>9</sup> An example of an instance was the utterance, described as *sarcastico*, in which someone had said *non mi piacciono i capelli....* ‘I don’t like your hair’ with no additional meaning other than what was said.

As can be seen from Figure 4, mismatch is more frequent in behaviors from the English language forum. Thus it appears that the greater correlation is between language, not use of the term *sarcastic*/SARCASTICO or *ironic*/IRONICO. In terms of similarities across the two languages, we can see that the mismatch was more pronounced for *sarcastic*/SARCASTICO than *ironic*/IRONICO in both datasets which is particularly interesting in light of Partington’s (2006) claim that the echoic mention theory of irony is in fact a theory of sarcasm. It suggests a gap between the first-order usage and Dynel’s (2015) second-order description of irony and sarcasm which predicted that sarcasm need not involve mismatch.

The frequency of no mismatch is surprising, given the centrality of this to theories of sarcasm and irony. As seen from Figure 4, this was more common in first-order irony for both the UK and Italian data, but particularly pronounced in the Italian data: approximately a third of the occurrences of SARCASTICO and over half of the occurrences of IRONICO did not involve any kind of mismatch. Frequently, the use of IRONICO to describe a behavior without mismatch, and more specifically, without (im)politeness mismatch, indexed a

<sup>9</sup> Occurrences which were unclear have been omitted.

non-serious behavior, in line with the importance of not taking one's self too seriously and being *autorionico* (lit. 'self-ironic', 'able to laugh at oneself'), discussed above. In such instances, it is likely that the speaker is also exploiting the deniability of the structures of sarcasm/irony and by claiming ironic/sarcastic intent aims to save face. In the case of SARCASTICO, half of the occurrences in the third person category were apparently mild, bald on-record face attacks such as the *non mi piacciono i capelli...* 'I don't like your hair' mentioned above and telling someone that *sembrava una contadinella* 'she looked like a peasant'.

### 5.3.2 Location of mismatch

Previous research into irony and sarcasm has hypothesized that, as well as being more aggressive, sarcasm is more overt and more likely to be on-record (e.g., Barbe 1995). Therefore, the behaviors labelled as SARCASTICO/*sarcastic* and IRONICO/*ironic* were categorized in terms of where the mismatch occurred; whether it was located in the context and shared knowledge of the participants ("external mismatch" in Culpeper's 2011 terms), as illustrated in example (2), or whether it was present internally within the utterance as in example (3).<sup>10</sup>

The findings in Figure 5 indicate that there is no clear correlation between the location of the mismatch and whether the behavior is labelled as SARCASTICO/*sarcastic* and IRONICO/*ironic*. Once again, a more distinct correlation is between the mismatch location and language set, because internal mismatch was more common for both Italian items IRONICO and SARCASTICO. The (in)frequency of internal mismatch in first-order uses would seem to challenge the second-order assumption that irony is more likely to be deniable than sarcasm because when the mismatch lies in the co-text it is overt, i.e., it is stated explicitly. This may point towards a higher salience for insincerity than off-recordness in the first-order understandings of IRONICO/SARCASTICO. Further research is needed to show to what extent these findings are dependent on the conversation occurring in a written medium.

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**10** This is not to simply equate internal/external mismatch with on/off recordness because the explicitness of the co-textual mismatch will be scalar, but it provides a starting point for testing whether sarcastic/ironic behaviour may be differentiated with reference to the kind of mismatch.

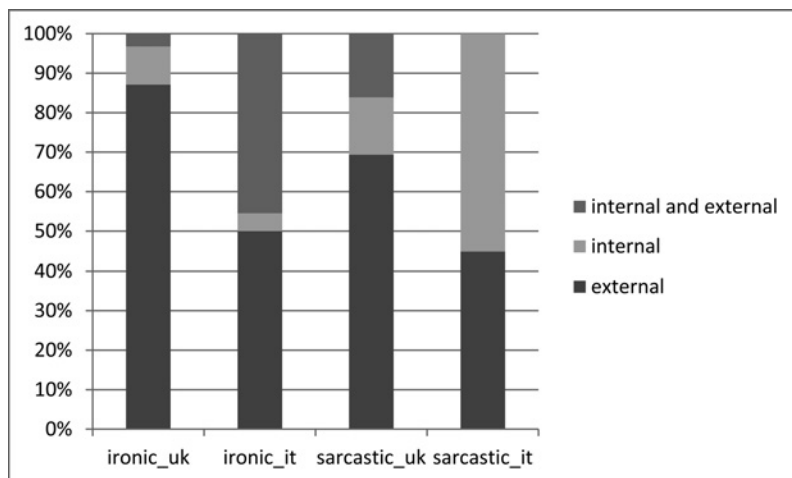


Figure 5: Location of mismatch.

## 6 Conclusions

This paper has attempted to approach the relationship between irony and sarcasm from a first-order perspective, in part as a response to calls such as Culpeper in Dynel (2013) for further work on first-order understandings of irony. The data was made up of 790 occurrences in which someone described themselves or another person using one of the metapragmatic labels *ironic*/IRONICO/*sarcastic*/SARCASTICO.

What has emerged from this research so far is that lay understandings of irony and sarcasm, when expressed explicitly (at the metapragmatic level in Eelen's (2001) classification), seem close to second-order conceptualizations in that the two concepts are viewed as being very similar and even interchangeable. However, when we move from explicit meta-knowledge to actual use of the labels (the classificatory level), in the UK data in particular, there was very little overlap between *ironic* and *sarcastic*.

In both sets of first-order data we see corroboration of second-order expectations. For instance, *sarcastic*/SARCASTICO are more likely to be unfavorably evaluated than being *ironic*/IRONICO, they are more likely to indicate behaviors with a target, and more likely to indicate face attack generally. These findings may constitute a core of shared first-order features, and further research may be able to show whether these distinctions are found in other communities, cultures or languages. Furthermore, it was clear that the participation role,

which has not been fully recognized in previous studies, is essential to any discussion of evaluation in analysis of irony and sarcasm.

There are also discrepancies with the second-order theorizations which are shared across both the UK and Italian datasets. For instance, there is little face-saving in *ironic*/IRONICO behaviors and participants are willing to self-identify as *sarcastic*/SARCASTICO. This may represent a shared set of features that have been overlooked as a result of the neglect of naturally occurring data. This consistent deviation between first/second-order also suggests that the use of *ironic* and *sarcastic* (and Italian equivalents) in elicitation or classification tasks with participants is problematic because it is likely that the researcher and participant are not accessing the same concept.

Differences were also noted between the two first-order datasets which confirm the cultural variation in first-order concepts of irony and sarcasm. For instance, the Italian behaviors were less likely to involve any mismatch and IRONICO did not predominantly indicate situational irony. Thus, when claims are made about first-order understandings or what metalanguage studies may capture, we need to be more specific about which cultural groups are under discussion. It is particularly important to trace where the English language data is closer to the second-order description because this may represent a case of the first-order having crept in to the second-order.

Regarding the relationship between irony and sarcasm, the first-order data did not suggest that on-recordness provided a reliable way of distinguishing between the two, nor did the presence of mismatch. There was evidence that behaviors labelled as *sarcastic*/SARCASTICO were more likely to involve face-attack and to have a human target in both languages, but this was not a clear cut difference. In many of the analyses discussed here, there appeared to be a stronger correlation with the language of the data, than with the use of the labels *ironic*/IRONICO or *sarcastic*/SARCASTICO. It also appeared that the terms IRONICO and SARCASTICO were more similar in first-order conceptualizations than the English equivalents. Further research with different datasets will be needed to see if this relationship holds up.

Overall, the analysis of first-order use shows that there is little to suggest that irony and sarcasm are interchangeable at this level or indeed that they overlap with one another any more than with other associated concepts such as mock politeness or humor. This constitutes an argument for disentangling the two concepts at a second-order level.

There are some limitations to the study which may have affected the findings, as discussed in the methodology section. The first is that this study only focusses on behaviors which were verbally evaluated as *sarcastic* or *ironic*. This was done in order to allow for a focused comparison of the use of these terms

in first and second-order talk, but in order to build on this and look at the expressive function in more detail, other methodologies will need to be developed. Second, although larger than most studies, when looking at sub-categories the sample size can get quite small. Third, this study is based on conversations from two forums and cannot aim to represent whole cultures.

Indeed, this paper is not intended to represent an end point for the analysis, but rather an initial opening up of first-order investigations in the field, which, ideally could be expanded across a constellation of contexts, cultures and languages in order to try and identify a core of first-order understandings of irony and sarcasm. It is hoped that these first-order perspectives may indicate further routes for research into the second-order concepts.

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## Bionotes

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